

1403 Determined to Be Free

“I loved all mankind, slaveholder not excepted, though I abhorred slavery more than ever. I saw the world in a new light. ... I gathered sacred pages of the Bible from the filthy street gutters and washed and dried them, that ... I might get word or two of wisdom from them.” These words are from **Frederick Douglass’** account of his conversion.

Frederick Douglass was born a slave with the name Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey on Holme Hill Farm in Talbot County, Maryland. His father was white, and his mother was a black enslaved woman. Although his birth date was not recorded, Douglass estimated that he had been born in February 1817 or 1818, and he later celebrated his birthday on February 14.

When he was eight, the man who owned him sent him to Baltimore, Maryland, to live in the household of Hugh Auld. There, Auld’s wife taught Douglass to read. Douglass eventually escaped slavery in Maryland and went to Massachusetts, where he became a noteworthy leader in the abolitionist movement. He became a prolific writer and a masterful orator who captivated readers and listeners throughout the U.S. and Great Britain. His talents contributed to the rise of the public’s antislavery sentiments.

About 1883, Douglass returned to purchase land in Talbot County. While there, "a colored school" invited him to address the students. He said:

I once knew a little colored boy whose mother and father died when he was six years old. He was a slave and had no one to care for him. He slept on a dirt floor in a hovel, and in cold weather would crawl into a meal bag head foremost and leave his feet in the ashes to keep them warm. Often, he would roast an ear of corn and eat it to satisfy his hunger, and many times has he crawled under the barn or stable and secured eggs, which he would roast in the fire and eat.

That boy did not wear pants like you do, but a tow linen shirt. Schools were unknown to him, and he learned to spell from an old Webster's spelling book and to read and write from posters on cellar and barn doors while boys and men would help him. He would then preach and speak and soon became well known. He became Presidential Elector, United States Marshal, United States Recorder, United States diplomat, and accumulated some wealth. He wore broadcloth and didn't have to divide crumbs with the dogs under the table. That boy was Frederick Douglass.¹

As a child, Douglass was exposed to several religious sermons, and in his youth, he sometimes heard Sophia Auld reading the Bible. In time, he became interested in literacy; he began reading and copying Bible verses and eventually became a Christian. He described this approach in his last autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*:

I was not more than thirteen years old when, in my loneliness and destitution, I longed for someone to whom I could go, as to a father and protector. The preaching of a white Methodist minister, named Hanson, was the means of causing me to feel that in God I had such a friend. He thought that all men, great and small, bond and free, were sinners in the sight of God: that they were but natural rebels against his government; and that they must repent of their sins, and be reconciled to God through Christ. I cannot say that I had a very distinct notion of what was required of me, but one thing I did know well: I was wretched and had no means of making myself otherwise. I consulted a good coloured man named Charles Lawson, and in tones of holy affection he told me to pray, and to "cast all my care upon God." This I sought to do; and though for weeks I was a poor, broken-hearted mourner, traveling through doubts and fears, I finally found my burden lightened, and my heart relieved. I loved all mankind, slaveholders not excepted, though I abhorred slavery more than ever. I saw the world in a new light,

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Douglass

and my great concern was to have everybody converted. My desire to learn increased, and especially did I want a thorough acquaintance with the contents of the Bible.

Black men and women have played significant roles in American history. Some stood in the ranks of the Continental Army and fought with their white comrades against British tyranny. Others put themselves in danger and infiltrated the British as spies. The slave, **James Armistead Lafayette**, is perhaps the most well-known Black spy of the American Revolution. The French General **Marquis de Lafayette** recruited him to spy for the patriots in the summer of 1781. James infiltrated **General Charles Cornwallis'** camp at Yorktown with his owner's permission. James purportedly pretended to be a runaway slave seeking freedom with the British army. He earned Cornwallis' trust and gained valuable military intelligence, which he communicated back to Lafayette. Lafayette sent all this to Washington, who would eventually defeat Cornwallis in October at the Siege of Yorktown. With Lafayette's assistance, James gained his freedom after the War and took Lafayette as his surname.²

Frederick Douglass was a brave Black man who openly spoke the truth, even when it put him in danger. He changed his name from Bailey to Douglass and fled to Massachusetts to escape slave catchers. There, he used his powerful speaking skills to argue against the injustices of slavery. Despite the risks, he published his autobiography, which forced him to flee to England for his safety. His example inspired people of all races to stand up for what is right.

The English, who had ended slavery in 1807 with the political expertise of **William Wilberforce**, enthusiastically received Douglass. His new English friends raised the money he needed to buy his freedom, and he returned to New York, where he established the "*North Star Newspaper*." He wrote for the abolition of slavery and promoted women's suffrage. His motto was: "Right is of no sex – Truth is of no color – God is Father of us all, and we are all Brethren." He also served as an adviser to President Lincoln.³

The likes of Frederick Douglass, James Armistead Lafayette, and all true patriots have taught us that the path to freedom is neither easy nor free. It requires us to make necessary sacrifices in order to claim this unalienable right. We cannot afford to succumb to tyranny, but must instead be willing to take risks for the sake of liberty, for it is the cornerstone upon which all our unalienable rights are built.

I have had church leaders tell me over the years that Christians are ALWAYS to submit to government, even if it goes against our beliefs. They speak about the Roman Christians who would not defy Caesar but meekly submit to him. They were wrong. Those Christians defied Caesar by worshiping in the catacombs rather than denying Christ and worshiping the emperor. As they had the opportunity, they preached the gospel rather than remaining silent – just like the apostles who defied the local religious authorities and said, "**We ought to obey God rather than men.**"⁴ They were free in Christ to live for Him without fearing men hindering or harming them (see **John 8:31-32**). These "free in Christ" believers spawned the "land of the free and home of the brave" in 1776.

Keep The Light of *Determining to Be Free* Burning!

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² Gruber, Kate E. "Black Spies of the American Revolution." American Battlefield Trust, 19 Dec. 2023, www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/black-spies-american-revolution. Accessed 22 Jan. 2024.

³ Federer, William J. *American Minute*. St. Louis, Amerisearch, Inc., 2012, p.44.

⁴ Acts 5:29 (NKJV)